

31st January 2021 – Epiphany +4 – Chris’s Sermon.

Mark 1:21-28

In our Gospel today, we hear a story about healing – a story about what it means to be whole and healthy. I think this is an important reading because it encourages us to look inward – to search out those places in our own hearts and minds that need our attention. Today, we’re reminded that we all have a shadow side. According to the story, while teaching in the synagogue, Jesus meets a troubled man – a man possessed by an unclean spirit. We don’t really know much about this spirit – but we do know that it’s destructive – it’s unhealthy. (This is his shadow side.)

The ancient Greeks believed that demons were inferior or low-level dark forces that lived deep within the human mind. And, when these forces became uncontrollable, they were considered diabolic or evil. (The word diabolic originally meant to divide or separate – so we’re talking today about the forces or influences that have the power to divide us or separate us from God.)

According to our reading, the unclean man cries out to Jesus in terror and fear – “what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us...?”

Of course, it’s the unclean spirit (the demon) who speaks, through the lips of the tormented man.

And, in response, Jesus speaks directly to the unclean spirit – “Be silent, and come out of him...”

And, of course, the situation is resolved when the unclean spirit is drawn out – the man is thrown to the floor in a fit of convulsions and the spirit is driven out. (No wonder the scribes and the teachers in the synagogue were amazed by this ministry – it’s remarkable – dramatic.)

Now, for some people, this is a story about the healing hands of Jesus – a story about divine power. For some, it’s a sign.

But, in a way (for me at least), this is also a story about our struggle to become whole and healthy. And. It’s a story about the way God looks at us – the way God sees us, even when we lose sight of ourselves.

Our reading reminds us that we’re valuable in the eyes of God – we are treasured – we are worthy of love, even when we struggle with our shadow side – when we’re tormented by dark thoughts or feelings – when the darkness threatens to overwhelm us.

As I’ve said on other occasions, the love of God is not unlike the love and the care that we offer to our children. Our reading talks about unconditional love, a love that can’t be bought or sold.

In the eyes of God, regardless of how deep we sink – regardless of how far we stray – regardless of how we see ourselves, today we are reminded that we are worthy of love in the eyes of God – we are worthy of healing and wholeness. (This is the heart of our Gospel.)

Again, this is a message that we need to take seriously. As a priest, visiting the sick and the troubled, I've met many people who find this hard to believe – hard to accept (in prisons, in nursing homes and in parishes).

When we wrestle with our unclean spirits – our inner demons (and we all have at least one or two tucked away somewhere) – when we struggle with vanity or greed or envy or self-pity or self-loathing – when we struggle with our shadow side (whatever that might look like), we often find it hard to believe that we can be fully known and fully loved. Many don't want to be fully known – believing that such a person could never be loved.

But again, our Gospel reading reminds us that the healing hand of God reaches out to us even when we fail or fall short of the mark. And, this is the message that we're called to share (as Christians) – we're called to remind people that God loves the greatest sinner who ever lived just as much as he loves the greatest saint. And, we honour this message by modelling the love that Jesus shared; Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself – not just those we find easy to love – not just those who return our love (we're called to show love and care to the people that we meet – especially those who feel somewhat isolated or overlooked).

I'm reminded of those wonderful words from psalm 145, verse 14, "The Lord upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down..." (All who fall – all who are bowed down). Surely, our reading today is an example of this – an example of God's unending love for us – a love that can break through to us in our need – a love that can restore the broken and the bowed down (a Love that we are called to share – and live).

In the words of psalm 147, verses 3-5, "God heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds. ...Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; his understanding is infinite." This is the message that's driven home to us today; as our Lord reached out in understanding to the tormented man in the synagogue – calling him back into the light.

In times of personal darkness, the love and forgiveness and healing of God is often revealed in unexpected ways – a healing of the heart and the mind that can lead us to a new place – which can then prompt our response. And what is the appropriate response? It's one of joy and gratitude and thanksgiving.

In a way, it's a shame our story ends so abruptly. I, for one, would like to hear more. What happened to this man after he was restored to wholeness? What did he do with his health and new freedom?

I like to think that this man, restored to wholeness, was then given an opportunity to begin a new journey – to move from a state of wholeness to a life of holiness.

Perhaps, as Christians, we are called to share a similar journey – to ask ourselves, where are we being led? What will this path to wholeness and holiness look like for us? These are not easy questions to answer. Perhaps they take a lifetime to answer.

Today, I pray that this love will continue to lead you on. I pray that the grace of our most loving God be known to us and those around us – shedding its light on us and opening our hearts and minds to new horizons, new blessings and peace. The Lord be with you.